

B O S T O N U N I V E R S I T Y

GRADUATE SCHOOL

Thesis

IRENÆUS AND THE PRINCIPLE OF AUTHORITY IN RELIGION

by

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IRENÆUS AND THE PRINCIPLE OF AUTHORITY IN RELIGION

Introduction

In opening the chapter on Irenaeus in his Lives of the Fathers, Frederic W. Farrar observes that he was one of three bishops by whom "the views of the church as to formal theology, as to Scripture interpretation, and as to her own position and authority, were mainly moulded in the first three centuries." If it be thought that any apology is necessary for the selection of a subject so limited as, at first glance, that of this thesis may appear to be, let me call attention to this testimony to Irenaeus' importance. The latter part of the statement in particular is worthy of note.

The general standpoint of this thesis is Protestant. That is, it is my plan, insofar as I can to attach no undue importance to the idea of authority in religion. At the same time, it is emphatically my position that there is much in the idea of authority that is valuable. I shall strive to analyze what we shall find in the thought of Irenaeus upon the subject, but, as I have indicated, I shall write neither from the standpoint of absolute acceptance in all its traditional phases of the idea of religious authority, nor from that of an utter deprecation of it.

In general, the whole tone and nature of this thesis is analytical. We are seeking to build up a picture out of the various indications that may be found in Irenaeus' writings of his thought on the subject. To the extent that we break down his complete work into its component thoughts upon authority; and in turn divide these thoughts into their structural elements, our work, then, is that of the analyst. I have taken it as within my province, however, to do more than report in academic fashion upon the elements in Irenaeus' thinking. In relation to one or two topics I have ventured, as will be seen, into a critical survey of his reasoning. This has been not due to any desire to destroy the idea of authority, but to the wish to eliminate from it such elements as may not be rationally valid, and thus reveal it as at least more able to stand upon its own feet in this particular age. For it must constantly be borne in mind that, fundamental and abiding as may be some of Irenaeus' ideas, certain of his concepts and arguments are rooted in an outworn system of thought.

This thesis presents no original discovery. Yet I do try in it to bring out clearly one point. I endeavor

to show that Irenaeus, because of his position in time, the particular training and instructors that he had, the events of his career, and especially because of his character and mental composition, was especially fitted to establish the principle of authority in religion substantially as it has been known through the centuries.

Thus, while our discussion may seem at first to be merely an examination of certain ideas in the writings of an ancient bishop, it is far more than that. Our discussion will be far more fruitful, and, I hope, rather more interesting, if we reflect that in the writings of Irenaeus we see the actual birth of ideas and concepts that for many generations have been cornerstones in the thinking of great numbers of Christians. For, agree or disagree as we may, we cannot deny the fact that the general principle of authority in religion, and its auxiliary ideas, such as that of the apostolic succession, have meant much to devout men.

A word as to the literature on the subject. It is in singularly poor condition. Irenaeus' own works have

been lost with the exceedingly important exception of Against Heresies, fortunately the one which contains the materials we need. There are fragments of the others, but there is no complete collection of his writings.

Commentaries upon him are largely to be found in standard church histories, many of these now not in use. Their comments are scanty and not illuminating, with some notable exceptions, such as the work of Schaff. There are also numerous books entirely upon the general topic of Irenaeus, but most of these are ancient, some so old as to be inaccessible in most libraries. Some of the best works upon Irenaeus are in German, and therefore have not been available to me. A thorough, modern work upon Irenaeus would be an excellent contribution for some scholar to make to the field of church history.

If these are our sources, the only other word is as to method. This has been to draw all conclusions from perusal to the primary sources. References have been made to the secondary sources either to confirm

my conclusions, or to borrow some choice phrasing of a point.

The portion of the work devoted to the life and character of Irenaeus is not to be regarded as in any sense merely introductory, but, due to the particular point of view I have already stated, as an integral part of the study.

PART I

Chapter I

THE LIFE OF IRENAEUS

Date of
Irenaeus'
Birth

The determination of the date of the birth of Irenaeus is no abstract academic consideration, for, as we have noted in the introductory survey, one element contributing to his significance as a figure in ecclesiastical history is his unique relation in time to the ages just before his career and just following it.

His birth has been variously estimated to have occurred from as early as the year 97 to as late as 147. The points from which we have to take our reckoning are themselves not definite. There are some facts, however, consideration of which will help us to choose some date as at least most probable. We know, in the first place, that Irenaeus was made a bishop in 177. This would indicate that he had attained some maturity by that time. Assuming him, therefore, to have been at least forty years of age at the time of his elevation to the episcopacy, we place the year of his birth as before 137.¹

With this excellent evidence for setting the date as before the year 137 at the very latest, we may proceed to adduce evidence tending to set it still

1. Zahn, art. in new S. H. encyl.

earlier. Irenaeus himself, speaking of the apocalyptic vision, writes, For that was seen no very long time since, but almost in our day, toward the end of Domitian's reign.¹ This would bring the date of the composition of the Apocalypse as before 96, and, if Irenaeus could say with reason that it was composed almost in his day, we must revise our estimate.

In Eusebius' record of a letter Irenaeus wrote to Florinus, we find still another hint to help us in determining the date we wish.² "For I saw thee when I was yet a boy in the lower Asia with Polycarp, moving in great splendor at court, and endeavoring by all means to gain his esteem." As Beaven³ points out, and as Zahn elaborates the point, the emperor who is referred to must have been Hadrian, the only one who spent any time in Asia Minor at this period. His visits occurred in 123 and 129.⁴ If Irenaeus was, according to his own account, yet a boy at this time, let us say fourteen years of age, the date of his birth would be set at 109 or 115. The age fourteen is, of course, arbitrary, but is a fair

1. Adv. Haer. V xxx 3

2. Euseb. XX v

3. Beaven, Account of
S. Irenaeus, p.4

4. Zahn, p. 29

assumption as a median age of boyhood. Since we have been rather free in setting back our estimates toward the earliest possible limits, let us here choose the later date, and establish the year in which Irenaeus was born as 115. Then, allowing for the highly conjectural nature of our attempt to set a definite date, and taking some cognizance of the consensus on the problem, let us say that Irenaeus was more probably born in the decade from 115 to 125.

Place
of
birth

In stating the place where Irenaeus was born, we do not have the same difficulty that we met in fixing the year of his birth. It is generally agreed by historians that he was born in or near Smyrna. We can be sure, at any rate that it was here that he spent his youth, for we have his own account as authority for the fact that he was a pupil of Polycarp, who was bishop of Smyrna.¹

Pupil
of
Poly-
carp

We must stop for a moment to note the importance of this fact. We are to see in a later part of our survey that Irenaeus laid the greatest possible stress upon tradition and upon apostolic sanction in general. The

1. Euseb. Bk. II, Ch. 20

fact that he had intimate personal contact with Polycarp both sets a background for this point of view and makes it thoroughly comprehensible. For Polycarp himself had been in direct contact with the first Christian generation; with the spring from which came the original tradition.

Was Polycarp pupil of John the Apostle? It has been customary to say that Polycarp was the pupil of the Apostle John, and from that would follow the almost direct connection of Irenaeus with the apostolic group itself. Writers upon Irenaeus for a long time never questioned that the connection was through this specific channel. We are about to investigate the problem, however, and point out that Polycarp was not a pupil of the Apostle John, but of another John. This will in no way invalidate our statements about Irenaeus. In the first place, we shall see that John the Elder, who was more probably the John referred to by Polycarp, had a position almost equal to that of the apostles from the point of view of relation to the source of Christian tradition. In the second place, our main problem is the study of Irenaeus' idea of authority, and whether or not one or more of his premises was incorrect will not affect what we shall conclude about the manner in which he built upon them.

As a good place from which to launch into this argument, let us quote from Irenaeus' Letter to Florinus,

which we find in Eusebius.¹

"As the studies of our youth growing with our minds, unite with it so firmly that I can tell the very place where the blessed Polycarp was accustomed to discourse; and also his entrances, his walks, the complexion of his life and the form of his body, and his conversations with the people, and his familiar intercourse with John, as he was accustomed to tell, as also his familiarity with those that had seen the Lord."

The question that has been raised of late is a by-product, from our point of view, of research as to the authorship of the fourth gospel. It is to the critics in New Testament, especially to Streeter, that we are indebted for our reasoning along this line. He raises first of all the question as to whether John the Apostle lived in Asia, and thus as to the possibility of his having been Polycarp's instructor.

John the
Apostle
not in
Asia

The arguments for Streeter's position, that John the Apostle did not live in Asia, are summarized by Charles.² The first is the lack of mention by any sub-apostolic writer that John the Apostle ever lived in Ephesus. The point is made in connection with the fact that the author of at least parts of John's gospel was a

1. Eusebius, Eccl. Hist., V, 20

2. Charles, Revelation, p. xivff.

leader in the Ephesian church. Ignatius, for example, in a letter to this church, has actually said nothing of any residence of John there. Justin and Hegesippus likewise fail to mention such a residence.

But how, it may be asked, can such an argument, lucid and convincing as it may appear, replace Irenaeus' own statement? There can be no doubt that Irenaeus thought that the John under whom Polycarp had studied was the Apostle. Charles' conclusions on this point are worth noting::

"That the later testimony of Irenaeus that John the Apostle resided in Asia, as well as the statement that Polycarp was a disciple of the Apostle, must be rejected if the Papias-tradition is correct, follows as a matter of course. Irenaeus is occasionally very inaccurate. His confusion of John the Elder with John the Apostle finds an exact parallel in his confusion of James the Lord's brother with James the son of Zebedee. In IV.27,1 he states that one of his authorities is a disciple of the disciples of the apostles; yet in 32,2 he designates the same man as a disciple of the apostles."¹

Other cases are cited to elaborate this point.

What we have done so far is to adduce evidence, in the light of modern scholarship, that Irenaeus was wrong in thinking that through his teacher Polycarp he was directly connected with the source of Christian truth through Polycarp's teacher, the Apostle John. If we take

1. Charles, Revelation, p.xivff.

away this line of descent, we seriously impair Irenaeus' position, especially for our purposes, unless we substitute some equally valid line of contact with the apostolic age. To do this we take our key from the reference in the last quotation to a "Papias-tradition."¹

This is found in Eusebius, and reads as follows:

Papias
tradition

"And again, on any occasion when anyone came in my way who had been a follower of the Elders, I would discourse about the declarations of the Elders--what was said by Andrew, or by Peter, or by Philip, or by Thomas or James, or by John, or Matthew or any other of the Lord's disciples, and what Aristion and the Elder John, the disciples of the Lord, say."

And later we read in Eusebius:²

"Papias...confesses that he had received the words of the Apostles from those who had followed them, but says that he himself was a hearer of Aristion and the Elder John."

Streeter observes that Papias uses the term

"Elders" to include not only the apostles mentioned, but the other two individuals. In reply to the theory that Papias means, when he says "the Elder John" the Apostle, he points out the improbability of speaking of an individual apostle as an elder, even though the term were applied to the Apostles as a group. Thus we have the appearance of a separate person, the Elder John. It is also noteworthy, in this connection, that Aristion is mentioned

John
the
Elder

1. Eusebius, Eccl. Hist., III, 39
2. Ibid.

bracketed with the Elder John. If this John were the Apostle, we should have Aristion mentioned as his equal in authority for the teaching of Christ,¹ which is manifestly absurd.

In the recollection of Irenaeus, listening as a child to Polycarp, he recalled him describing his intercourse with John. But now that we have seen that the Apostle John did not live in Asia, we may say that Polycarp could have used such a phrase as "John and the rest who had seen the Lord," in referring to the Elder John, and Aristion.

Streeter goes on to reason from the personal authority which this man takes for granted, for he assumes him to have written the Johannine epistles and from the description of himself as "the Elder," that he was "a disciple of the Lord in some sense which made him an authority for authentic tradition second only to the original apostles."

Other
consid-
erations

Now, Tertullian agrees with Irenaeus, who says that Polycarp was appointed by Apostles in Asia bishop of the church in Smyrna, except that Tertullian says that Polycarp was so installed by John. But in the Apostolic Constitutions, the list of bishops ordained in the lifetime of the Apostles is, for Smyrna,

"Ariston the first, after whom Strataeas the son of Lois, and the third Ariston."

1. Streeter, Primitive Church, p. 93

Streeter reasons that this is an earlier and more authentic tradition because of the discrepancy between it and the statement of Irenaeus, and the fact that this early writer must have presented his statement in the face of the popular idea that Polycarp was ordained by the Apostle. Chronological considerations also play a part. The traditional date for the death of John (whichever one lived in Asia), is 100, and at that time Polycarp would be thirty years old, at which age it was improbable that he would be made a bishop.¹

It has been very hard to trace out this line of reasoning, for the scholars from whom we have adapted it have been primarily interested in establishing certain facts for the purpose of New Testament criticism, so that we have been compelled to change much of their emphasis for our needs in church history. Some sort of summary is necessary. Writers upon Irenaeus have been accustomed to place much weight upon his supposed connection with the Apostle John, through Polycarp, Irenaeus' teacher. Recent scholarship has made it very probable that the Apostle John was never in Asia, thus did not instruct Polycarp; and that Irenaeus was in error in stating this connection. In this way, the link with the source of authority which has been traditionally ascribed

1. Streeter, Primitive Church, p. 98

Irenaeus still in position to receive apostolic teaching to Irenaeus is shattered. However, the same scholars who have destroyed this tradition have established that Polycarp was referring to one John the Elder, whose first-hand knowledge he was privileged to enjoy. Our loss is not so great, for this man is substituted in the chain, and Irenaeus, as Polycarp's pupil, still stands to benefit by the latter's connection with John. As Streeter, who has done the most important work on this question, concludes:

"It would seem, then, that we must make an addition to the names of those outstanding leaders in the great churches, commonly known as 'Apostolic Fathers,' whose epistles have come down to us and are our main authority for the history and doctrine of the Church at the turn of the first and second centuries. Along with, indeed in front of, Clement of Rome, Polycarp of Smyrna, and Ignatius of Antioch, we must place the Elder John."¹

Thus, as recent discoveries have forced us to question the traditional view that Polycarp received the teaching of the Apostle John, and passed it on to Irenaeus, we have lost nothing essential to our main argument, for in the Elder John we find an adequate link in the chain of tradition. And even if we could not establish Irenaeus' connection through specific individuals, we should be able to think of him as the beneficiary of the apostolic teaching, and if this more recent speculation be incorrect, and the chain be John the Apostle, Polycarp, Irenaeus, the

1. Streeter, Primitive Church, p. 100

advantage is the same. Greater than the question as to whether John was Elder or Apostle, or both, is the fact of the channel of apostolic teaching.

Other
edu-
cation

In the preface to Against Heresies,¹ Irenaeus mentions another teacher, to whose opinion he attaches great weight. It is very possible that this was Papias, and Coffin thinks Papias was, in fact, his first teacher.² Jerome was the first to make the deduction that Papias had some part, if not the first, in training Irenaeus.³ As we shall see from Irenaeus' writings, he frequently mentions elders who were direct pupils of the Apostles.

A careful examination of his work shows the fruit of what must have been a rather extended education, especially in the field of Greek poetry and thought. Quotations from works in this field are found in his writing. As a student of the Scriptures he shows considerable facility not only in marshalling what he needs, but in its interpretation. The rather minute knowledge of the Gnostic theology which he exhibits especially in the first two books of his chief work could only have been acquired by much labor and study.

Subse-
quent
career

Most of Irenaeus' work was to be done not in Asia Minor but in Gaul. Between the two regions there

1. Section 2
2. p. 227
3. Farrar, p. 93

was a close connection in Christian matters, the church of Smyrna, through its missionary activity, being especially interested in those of Lyons and Vienna.¹ It is in connection with this Christian community that we shall see Irenaeus working from now on.

Removal to Gaul Schaff thinks that Irenaeus may have gone with Polycarp on the latter's journey to Rome in 154 in the matter of the Easter controversy.² Subsequent to this visit, if he made it, came the removal to Gaul that we have noted. It is probable that he was at least a deacon when he went to Lyons, and perhaps a presbyter. The maturity that he must have attained by whatever date he moved, in addition to the talents he must have displayed at even an early age, would argue for an early beginning of his ecclesiastical career. If Schaff's hypothesis be correct, and Irenaeus did accompany Polycarp to Rome, it would seem even more probable that he had some official position at least by the time he was sent away as a missionary.

Mission to Rome Jerome, however, calls Irenaeus a priest of Pothinus. It might be argued from this that Irenaeus was ordained after his arrival at Lyons, for Pothinus was the bishop of that city, and the custom of the time was for each bishop to speak of all priests ordained by himself as subject to

1. Coffin, p. 228

2. Schaff, Hist. p. 749

him.¹ However, it is possible that the reference is to Irenaeus as subject to Pothinus after being transferred from Asia Minor, where he had already been ordained. At any rate, we know that by 177, Irenaeus had attained a position of prominence and of trust among the other presbyters at Lyons. In that year this group wrote a letter attesting him as their representative to Eleutherus, bishop of Rome, to bring their advice and testimony in regard to the perplexing Montanist controversy. They wrote:²

"We have requested our brother and companion Irenaeus to carry this epistle to you, and we exhort you to consider him as commended to you as a zealous follower of the testament of Christ. For if we knew that any place could confer righteousness upon any one, we would certainly commend him among the first as a presbyter of the church, the station that he holds."

Perse-
cution
at
Lyons

It was during the absence of Irenaeus in Rome on this mission that the fearful persecution of 177 occurred at Lyons, and among the martyrs was the bishop Pothinus, then ninety years old.³ Pothinus in his martyrdom exhibited the highest type of Christian courage and loyalty, and the viciousness of the persecution is best understood from the cruel way in which such a venerable and saintly character was treated, as recorded by Eusebius.⁴ It is in this

1. Beaven, Account of
Irenaeus, p. 9

2. Euseb., Eccl. Hist. V, 4

3. Euseb., Eccl. Hist.
V, 5

4. Ibid., V, 1

record that we read of Pothinus' reply to the question of the official as to the Christians' God, "If thou art worthy, thou shalt know."

Irenaeus
elected
bishop

Irenaeus was elected as bishop of Lyons to succeed Pothinus.¹ It is possible that he was consecrated at Rome, if it happened that he was there to receive news of his selection. In such case, he may have been consecrated at Rome for the sake of convenience, since we have no record of any other bishop in Gaul.² But such a course of action would be merely for the convenience that it would bring, and would not signify any special authority for the bishop of Rome in the matter.

Eusebius³ speaks of "the churches of Gaul, over whom Irenaeus presided." In the absence of any specific mention of other bishops in Gaul than the bishop of Lyons, and in view of this specific statement by Eusebius, we may think of Irenaeus as discharging grave responsibilities, Schaff says of him,⁴

"he labored with zeal and success, by tongue and pen, for the restoration of the heavily visited church, for the spread of Christianity in Gaul, and for the defence and development of its doctrines. He thus combined a vast missionary and literary activity."

Jerome mentions Irenaeus as a martyr only incidentally,⁵

1. Euseb., Eccl. Hist.,
V, 5

2. Beaven, Account of
Irenaeus, p. 18

3. Eccl. Hist., V, 23

4. Hist., V, 2, p.749

5. Zahn, in Schaff-Herzog,
Encyc., Irenaeus,
p. 29

Was
Irenaeus
a martyr?

after speaking of him as flourishing between 180 and 192, or in the reign of Commodus. A later tradition has it that he was a martyr in the persecution of 202.¹ But since Jerome's mention is not definite, and since Tertullian, Hippolytus, and especially Eusebius, concur in failing to make any mention of Irenaeus as a martyr, we must do without any exact knowledge as to the end of his life.

1. Schaff, Hist., p. 749

Chapter II

THE WORKS OF IRENAEUS

Irenaeus accomplished much of his work through the medium of literature, a field in which he seems to have been proficient and prolific. The majority of his works are known to us only through records or notes, largely to be found in Eusebius. We are fortunate in having his principal work, our chief source, preserved. We shall do well to note the minor works first, and then to give somewhat more detailed attention to Against Heresies.

On sov-
ereign-
ty

We are indebted to Florinus, for it was his theological difficulties, and especially his susceptibility to the teachings of Valentinus, that called forth much of Irenaeus' writing, in the form of letters and treatises. We may note first an epistle to Florinus On Sovereignty which sought to establish, according to Eusebius "the truth that God is

On the
Ogdoad

not the author of evil; for the latter (Florinus) appeared to maintain this opinion.¹ We catch rather a telling picture of Florinus and his difficulties in Eusebius' mention of another of Irenaeus' works Treatise on the Ogdoad,² "On whose account, as he was again on the point of being carried away by the Valentinian delusion, Irenaeus also also wrote the treatise on the Ogdoad, or the number

1. Eccl. Hist., V, 20

2. Ibid.

eight; in which book he also shows that he was the first that received the original succession from the apostles." This note by Eusebius gives us a clue to the importance of this work in our special study, and, as Zahn observes,¹ "loss of this work is specially regrettable, since Irenaeus seems in it to have dwelt in detail on his relation to the first post-apostolic generation."

On Schism In addition to these works inspired by a desire to set Florinus aright, Eusebius mentions other works. The first of these is an epistle to Blastus On Schism.²

On Know- Then there is On Knowledge, "a certain very brief and ledge most important discourse," which was evidently intended as an apology for Greek consumption. Coupled with this

The Apos- is mentioned another discourse meant as a proof of the tolic apostolic preaching. An Armenian version of this has Preach- been discovered in Eriwan in the form of a manuscript of ing the late thirteenth century, and is thought to include about two-thirds of the original work, which was probably in Syriac. Thus this book, known for so long only by name, is now available for study, and is the second most fruitful source for the direct study of Irenaeus.

Other works The other minor works of Irenaeus include a letter to Victor, giving the consensus of the Christians in Gaul

1. Art. in Schaff-Herzog Encyc., p. 30

2. Eccl. Hist., V, 20

that the Resurrection should only be celebrated on the Lord's Day,¹ and various others, of which only fragments are available. Zahn lists,² in addition to the works we have noted, the following: letter to an Alexandrian bishop, letter to Demetrius of Vienne, a book of various discourses, a work relating the martyrdom of Sanctus and Biblias, and a treatise against the theory that matter is eternal. He gives as of doubtful authenticity a Syriac fragment of an exposition of Canticles, and states that the four Pfaff fragments, published in 1715, were forgeries.

Against
Heresies

We are now ready to consider the work by which Irenaeus is best known, and through which he made his significant contribution to his own age and to the thought of the church at large. The full title of this work was A Refutation and Subversion of Knowledge falsely so called, but it is generally known as Against Heresies.³ Beaven⁴ places the date of writing between 184 and 192, basing his argument upon the inclusion of Eleutherus in the list of the bishops of Rome, in Book III, 3 of Against Heresies, and upon Irenaeus' familiarity with Theodotion's translation of the Old Testament, which appeared about 184. Since Eleutherus died in 192, we may accept this reasoning as sound.

Since the work forms the basis of our study of

Contents
of
Against
Heresies

Irenaeus' view of authority and furnishes almost all our

1. Eusebius, Ecc. Hist..
V, 24
2. Art. in Schaff-Herzog
Encyc.

3. Introductory note to
Roberts-Rambaut trans-
lation.
4. Account of Irenaeus, p.34

source material, we may pause for a moment to outline it.

It consists of five divisions or books. The first lists

Book I in considerable detail the fantastic teaching of the Gnostics. In the preface to it Irenaeus speaks of "the plausible system of these heretics, which I now proceed to describe." The largest single division (Chapters 1--7) describes Valentinus' version of Gnosticism. Chapter 10 dwells upon the unity of the Church's faith.

Irenaeus, in his preface to the second book, announces Book II his intention to "overthrow, by means of lengthened treatment under distinct heads, their whole system." The book essays to carry out this purpose by pointing out the inconsistency and impossibility of the Gnostic doctrines. Much of the book is direct attack upon the system, and there is also a resumption of the method used in portions of the first book, the refutation of specific arguments and views. Three chapters of this book are important because of their expression of Irenaeus' views on the use of Scripture.

Book III In the preface to his third book, Irenaeus says he will adduce proofs from the Scriptures. However, in the fervor of the argument, he takes up also the argument from tradition. This book is the most important of the five for our purposes, and to give any general view of Irenaeus' thought.

Book IV

The preface to Book IV indicates that the author planned to "add weight, by means of the words of the Lord," to what he had already presented, but the plan goes astray, and the book is composed of miscellaneous

Book V

material. The last book, in which he had intended "to exhibit proofs from the rest of the Lord's doctrine and the apostolical epistles"¹ is likewise difficult to give in synopsis, and is concerned with theological opinions not relevant to our specific purpose.

The occasion of the writing of Against Heresies was the trouble caused in the church by the writings of Florinus, a presbyter who had embraced Valentinian Gnosticism.² It was evidently written at the specific request of some friend of Irenaeus, for the author says,³ "I have felt constrained, my dear friend, to compose the following treatise," and, since Irenaeus speaks of⁴ "transmitting to thee, my very dear friend, this fourth book of the work," was evidently written in sections. It is probable, since it was instigated by the needs of a friend but assumed such large proportions, that the work is longer and more detailed than Irenaeus had at first planned.

1. Preface, Bk. V
2. Zahn, art. in Schaff-Herzog. Encyc.

3. Against Heresies, preface, Bk. I
4. Ibid., preface, Bk IV

Chapter III

THE CHARACTER OF IRENAEUS

What manner of man was this, who so staunchly defended orthodox views from the attractive but deceptive system of the Gnostics, and in doing so made a great contribution to the thought of the church throughout the centuries?

The first point on which our thinking must be clear if we are to understand Irenaeus is that he was primarily a religious man. Nothing but an earnest spiritual attitude, it seems to me, could have furnished a dynamic sufficiently powerful to have produced such a vigorous attack as we have in Against Heresies. Walker states this aspect of Irenaeus' character clearly when he writes that he was¹ "a man of deeply religious spirit, his interest was in salvation." Failure to appreciate this fact would prevent our understanding Irenaeus.

Next let us note his training and preparation for the task that was his. He had the advantage of the culture of his day. He possessed a Greek education, and it is perhaps to this that was due his philosophical penetration. His writing shows familiarity with literature on Biblical interpretation,² and with Greek classic literature. That he possessed both diligence in study and linguistic ability

1. History of the Christian Church, p. 66

2. Against Heresies, V, 30

we may infer from the fact that he learned Celtic in order to carry on more efficiently his work in Gaul. He writes,¹ "Thou wilt not expect from me, who am resident among the Keltae, and am accustomed for the most part to use a barbarous dialect, any display of rhetoric...." This linguistic effort indicates as well missionary zeal on the part of Irenaeus.

His
system
born in
struggle

An examination of his writing would lead one to think of Irenaeus as unduly polemic, and as extreme in his theological position. It must be borne in mind, however, that the theology which Irenaeus was formulating had its roots in the struggle with Gnosticism. Under such conditions, violently opposed as it was to a strongly entrenched heresy, such a theology would be naturally extreme. But it is not fair to estimate Irenaeus apart from a consideration of the specific ends toward which he worked.

Moder-
ation

As a matter of fact, Irenaeus is rather to be remarked for his calm good sense and moderation. He exhibited clear judgment not only as an administrator but as a theologian. Coupled with acute perception, he had the quality of sound judgment and the ability to express himself clearly. In brief, his intellectual attitude might be described as one of balanced security. All these qualities are thoroughly

1. Against Heresies, pref., Bk. 1

in harmony with that view of the typical Catholic mind that we shall see later,⁴ and combined they made Irenaeus the "first writer of the post-apostolic period who deserves the title of a theologian."¹

It was precisely because of this combination of characteristics that Irenaeus was so successful in his important task of bringing order out of the near-chaos of his time. His entire work was one of harmonizing and ordering. Such a work would require an individual like Irenaeus, not so much brilliant and original as sound and judicious, and with largeness of vision. Such an individual is apt to try to conserve rather than to create, and such a tendency was especially significant in a thinker like Irenaeus,² linked as he was by his teacher and grand-teacher to the fountainhead of Christianity. So, if Irenaeus was dogmatic as a writer it was because, "as a controversialist, he differed with many in his time, because he steadily kept in view the pleasing task of reconciling differences instead of widening the breach between contending parties, and thus harmonized the churches, instead of arraying them against each other."³

It remains only to note that in addition to these qualities of learning and of intellectual ability, Irenaeus

1. Zahn, art. in new Schaff-Herzog Encyc. p. 30

2. Schaff, History of the Christian Church, p. 751

3. Coffin, Lives and Times of the Fathers, p. 230

4. Ch. 5

added considerable administrative ability. We may be sure of this from his selection as the representative of his region on the mission to Eleutherus, and his election to succeed Pothinus. That he was a practical churchman is evidenced by the fact that a compilation of his sermons was known a century and a half after his death. Thus we see how it could be said of Irenaeus, trained as he was in secular, philosophical, and Biblical literature, a man naturally possessed of calm, moderate, balanced judgment, and a practical churchman that "his actual influence upon the development of the church was greater than that of perhaps any other teacher of the first three centuries."¹

1. Zahn, art. in new Schaff-Herzog Encyc.

PART II

Chapter IV

GENERAL CONCEPTION OF THE CHURCH

The church is the center about which revolves authority in religion, according to the Catholic point of view, and in the general position taken by Irenaeus. Accordingly, in this and the two chapters following, we shall discuss the church. Here we shall note Irenaeus' view of the nature of the church; later we shall analyze the church more specifically in her function as the repository of authority. What we shall say here, however, is of more than a merely introductory nature, for only in certain conceptions of the church can the idea of authority be firmly rooted. Again, we shall note here points that will be more fully developed in succeeding chapters.

Various meanings of term Church in Irenaeus

Irenaeus uses the the term church in various meanings. Occasionally we find the term used referring to the local, specific groups of believers. It is in this sense that he uses the term when he speaks of Valentinus¹ who "came to Rome in the time of Hyginus * * * coming frequently into the church, and making public confession, he thus remained, one time teaching in secret,

1. Against Heresies III, 4,3

and then again making public confession; but at last, having been denounced for corrupt teaching, he was excommunicated from the assembly of the brethren."

It will be readily seen from the phrases in italics that the church here referred to is a definite, factual, group of Christians. It is also in this sense that Irenaeus spoke of the¹ "most ancient churches with which the apostles held constant intercourse." In general, it is safe to say that Irenaeus used the term in the plural when speaking of churches in this sense.

The
visible
church
universal

More important for our particular ends, however, is Irenaeus' view of the church universal, for it was this church which he meant when he was dealing with matters of authority. This meaning of the term may be interpreted in two senses; the first being that of the visible, factual community throughout the whole world. Beaven has called the church in this sense an "ascertainable society,"² which well expresses the meaning. It is found most clearly stated in Irenaeus' own writings in the following passages: "The church, though dispersed throughout the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith***."³

1. Against Heresies III, 4, 1

2. Account of St. Irenaeus, p. 74

3. Against Heresies I, 10, 1

and "every church should agree with this church* * that is, the faithful everywhere."¹ The first extract points out unequivocally the notion of the church as a single unity, an organism, extended as it might be, while the other, while not making as clear the idea of one-ness, nevertheless calls attention to it through its reference to the faithful everywhere. Thus in this second, and, in Irenaeus' thinking, more common meaning, we have the church thought of as "la communauté-unique, dispersée dans tout e'univers et formée par l'ensemble des Églises particulières."² I have quoted this statement by Spikowski because in it we find both conceptions of the church that we have remarked so far.

Church
in its
theo-
logical
sense

Before we take up various aspects of this view of the church, we might point out that at times Irenaeus holds a mystical, more abstract and more theological, rather than a practical view. At such times in his writings we find the church thought of in ways that set it above the notion of an ascertainable, definite body. For, notwithstanding the high idea of the church just noted, and soon to be expanded, it remains in the final analysis a compound of human elements.

Such a conception as that with which we are now dealing is found in Irenaeus' view of the church as the body of Christ. Speaking of those who will have to face

1. Against Heresies I, 10, 1

2. Spikowski--La Doctrine de L'Eglise Dans Saint Irénée. "the unique community, scattered through all the world and formed by the total of the specific churches."

judgment by God, he lists those¹ "who* * * cut in pieces and divide the great and glorious body of Christ, and so far as in them lies, destroy it." Another conception, even more mystical, is that the Logos is the fountain-head of the church.²

It will be noted that Irenaeus here goes further than to state of the Logos that it is the source of truth. He conceives of it as directly the head of the actual church. Such a conception is unequivocal in the matter of the church's authority. In the present tendency to minimize the ancient Logos concept, we might fail to realize the importance of this position. It must be realized from this statement of Irenaeus, if we are to understand him clearly, that by it he implies the highest authority for the church.

This more mystical view of the church is again expressed in a somewhat different manner when in Book III, chapter 6, Irenaeus writes, in interpreting Psalms 82:1,¹ "He refers to the Father and the Son, and those who have received the adoption; but these are the church. These three references will serve to illustrate the mystical view of the church. Summed up, it was the great and glorious body of Christ, the Logos was its head, and it

1. "God standeth in the congregation of the mighty; he judgeth among the gods."

was composed of all the adopted sons of God.¹

Before we leave this view of the church, and return to a consideration of the more practical, tangible view, it is interesting to stop for a moment and consider a paradox. To Irenaeus, a direct outgrowth or corollary of the notion that the church is the body of Christ was the idea that the church possesses authority in matters of faith because of this very relationship. Now, if almost any Protestant is asked to define the church, he will probably reply that it is the body of Christ. He may not have worked out the answer himself, as it is a part of traditional Protestant teaching material, but it is the best answer he can give.

Yet the Protestant conception of authority in religion is radically different from that in Irenaeus. Protestantism denies authority to the church, yet defines the church as did Irenaeus when he was seeking to define it in such a way as to establish beyond question its claim to authority. So far as I can see, Irenaeus was entirely correct. It would seem to follow logically from such a view of the church that Christians should hold it in special reverence as a source of truth. The trouble lies in the conception itself.

1. There are other references in Irenaeus, of a metaphorical nature, tending to amplify this mystical, rather than the practical, view of the church. Thus in Against Heresies V, 20, 2, we read that the church is a garden, in which men may eat from every tree (Scripture), save the heresies.

The Protestant use of the term "body of Christ" is more figurative than the Catholic.

Church
as guardian
of
truth

Returning now to the notion of the church as a universal, ascertainable body, we must note two different functions which Irenaeus assigns to it. The first of these is the preservation of the faith, which has been received from the apostles. We shall later discuss specifically the matter of apostolic sanction as a proof of the validity of religious truth, so here we need to cite but one typical extract. Speaking in Against Heresies, Bk. II, 9, of proofs of God's creatorship, the writer caps his proofs by saying, "The universal church, moreover, through the whole world, has received this tradition from the apostles."

This last quotation illustrates the fact of the apostolic transmittal of the truth to the church. To illustrate my first point made in this connection, that the church is viewed as the repository or preserver of the faith, I direct attention again to part of Bk. III, 24,¹ "For this gift of God has been entrusted to the church, as breath was to the first created man, for this purpose, that all the members receiving it may be vivified."

Not only is the church universal in point of extension

1. Another good reference on this is IV, 33,8: "True knowledge* * * has come unto us, being guarded and preserved, without any forging of Scriptures, by a very complete system of doctrine."

Church
renewed
in faith

in space, but Irenaeus views it as a unity in time. That is, he sees it as being constantly renewed in the faith which it is its task to preserve. He writes of¹ "our faith, which having been received from the church, we do preserve, and which always, by the Spirit of God, renewing its youth, as if it were some precious deposit in an excellent vessel, causes the vessel itself containing it to renew its youth also." What the apologist is doing here is to argue against heresy by opposing to it the uniform teaching of the church, "which remains so always, and is consistent with itself."²

Such an argument is most typical of Irenaeus. It throws light upon the nature of his mind, the categories of his thinking. Harmony, consistency, unity of doctrine, constitute for him an irrefutable guarantee of validity. We shall devote some time later to a critical analysis of this point of view, but it is interesting to note it here as typically Irenaeus and typically Catholic.

It was necessary for Irenaeus to give to his statement about the church some elasticity, for if he dogmatically and inclusively took his stand upon the absolute consistency and unanimity of the church, his argument would soon run upon some very solid rocks. It was not at all

1. Against Heresies, Bk. III, 24, 1
2. Ibid., Bk. III, heading to Ch. 24

uncommon for constituent elements in the church to break away, to teach doctrine contrary to that apostolic truth that the church was to preserve. It is important for us to remark here Irenaeus' view that the universal church was the infallible vessel of the truth. In other words, even if members did depart from orthodoxy, the great church as a church, as a body, could not do so. This is well illustrated in the 26th chapter of Book IV of Against Heresies, which is largely devoted to this problem.

That Irenaeus saw clearly the fact of departure from the truth is seen in the second section where he writes, "But * * * hold in suspicion others who depart from the primitive succession, and assemble themselves together in any place whatsoever, either as heretics * * or as schismatics * * or as hypocrites." But the great church itself could not be harmed, for "those who cleave asunder, and separate the unity of the church, shall receive from God the same punishment as Jeroboam did."

Church
the
teacher
of the
truth

So much for the church as preserver of the faith. To round out our picture of Irenaeus' general notion of the church, it remains to be pointed out that the church universal, the ascertainable body, had a second function. Not only was she to preserve the faith but she was

to teach it. Since this too, properly belongs in detail to a later section, it will do here merely to mention it. This teaching function is thought of as being carried out largely by the bishops and presbyters of the church.

Summary

As we sum up what has been said of Irenaeus' general conception of the church, let us remember that, in case the material on any one topic seems slight, many of them will be more thoroughly dealt with as we proceed. This chapter is designed to give us a survey of the topic. Irenaeus uses the term church at times to mean a local group of believers. Most often he uses it to denote the great church universal. This is both a practical, ascertainable union of "believers everywhere" in the world, and a more mystical abstract union of the "adopted sons of God" into "the body of Christ," of which the Logos is the head. In its more practical aspect the church has two functions, each intimately concerned with our inquiry into the principle of authority in religion. On the one hand, the church is the vessel in which the true apostolic doctrine is preserved; on the other, it is the teacher, especially through its bishops, of this doctrine.

Chapter V

THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH
IN MATTERS OF FAITH

The question of the relation of the church to faith is one of the most significant problems dealt with by Irenaeus. By a careful consideration of it we shall be better able to understand his point of view than by a consideration of any other single topic, although a whole picture of the mind of Irenaeus is only obtained after we have examined his teaching in its entirety.

References to what he considers the rightful function of the church as the arbiter of the truth are plentiful in Against Heresies, being found in all five books as well as in the prefatory notes to the last two, and also being found in the Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching. The references for the most part, however, are not found in the form of direct didactic statements on the problem of the Church's authority, as much as they are implied in statements more directly concerned with the work of refuting the heresies. Then, too, some of our findings will be in the nature of negative statements, which we must turn about in order to see them in their fullest possible meaning. Irenaeus, we must remember, was not so immediately concerned

with any other issue as he was with demonstrating wherein his opponents were wrong. It is easy for us to lose sight of that fact, now that time has taken care of the particular heresies that so concerned him, and has brought into perspective more fundamental problems such as the one with which we are dealing.

Method

It will be best for us, if we are to have the feeling of analyzing for ourselves the essence of Irenaeus' teaching on the authority of the Church, to draw it out bit by bit from the references, or at least from the most important ones, as we find them in order. Then we can draw general conclusions and state the various aspects of Irenaeus' view in accordance with some scale of values, and in that way arrive at some summary statement and perhaps a formula.

Argument from unity of faith

The fact that Irenaeus introduces one argument for the authority of the church before another is not indicative of their respective values. We should expect that the first developed argument would be that from the apostolic nature of the church's faith, but such is not the case. Irenaeus was dealing with an elaborate system, and his arguments were of necessity equally lengthy. Since his work was one of refutation point by point, rather than the

construction of his own doctrine, point by point, from a clear start, we find him bringing in his various arguments with reference to the particular points in hand rather than in the order of their importance.

Thus we see how it is possible for the first argument for the authority of the church to be based upon the unity of its faith throughout the whole world. This in itself is a rather naive approach; a position far from invulnerable from the standpoint of logic, and is made only slightly less so by consideration of the fact that Irenaeus does not introduce it out of a clear sky, but opposes it to the difference among themselves of the "fathers" of Gnosticism.

The central statement of his position is certainly unequivocal.¹

"As I have already observed, the church, having received this preaching and this faith, although scattered throughout the whole world, yet, as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it. She also believes these points of doctrine just as if she had but one soul, and one, and the same heart, and she proclaims them, and teaches them, and hands them down, with perfect harmony, as if she possessed only one

1. Against Heresies I, x, 2

mouth. For, although the languages of the world are dissimilar, yet the import of the tradition is one and the same. For the churches which have been planted in Germany do not believe or hand down anything different, nor do those in Spain, nor those in Gaul, nor those in the East, nor those in Egypt, nor those in Libya, nor those which have been established in the central regions of the world. But as the sun, that creature of God, is one and the same throughout the whole world, so also the preaching of the truth shineth everywhere, and enlightens all men that are willing to come to a knowledge of the truth. Nor will any one of the rulers in the churches, however highly gifted he may be in point of eloquence, teach doctrines different from these (for no one is greater than the Master); nor, on the other hand, will he who is deficient in power of expression inflict injury on the tradition. For the faith being ever one and the same, neither does one who is able at great length to discourse regarding it, make any addition to it, nor does one, who can say but little, diminish it."

With this quotation, given at length because of its summary value, before us, we may now use it as a

sort of text and, expounding upon it, draw three implications or observations from it.

The first of these is that such a point of view might be expected from Irenaeus, because of what we have noted of his history. In other words, we have here one facet of our general thesis that because of his position in time, general character, and work in the church, he was peculiarly fitted to crystallize the Catholic doctrine of authority in religion. Born into the tradition of Asia Minor, transferred to Gaul, where he seems to have been familiar with the spirit of the entire Christian movement there, familiar with the official circles of church life at Rome, he had an unparalleled opportunity to note the unanimity in thought among the various branches of the church.

The second observation that we are enabled to make as a result of examining this point of view of Irenaeus, is that it gives us an interesting and illuminating glimpse into the nature of his mind, its method of working, its general outlook. For while it is true that Irenaeus made his contribution to the whole Catholic position in general largely because he, with his mind already cast into the categories that we are wont to say constitute the Catholic

mind, came upon the scene at a time when conditions were ripe for the operation of some such regulative force; it is no less true that from his works we are able to deduce a great deal as to the nature of Irenaeus' mind, and thus to have some check upon our original hypothesis.

To make this point clear, we may divide all religious minds into two general groups. Let us call the first of these the Protestant type. It pays no particular attention to the degree in which a doctrine may be shared by all other minds, and the fact that a doctrine is unanimously held has no reference at all to its validity. Such a mind, in its theoretically pure type at least, weighs each doctrine on its own merits and without regard for what other thinkers, either past or present, may have decided. It is a question if this Protestant type of mind, or the Catholic type we are soon to consider, is ever found in purity. Each to some extent exhibits characteristics of the other. Yet in theory at least we may continue our analysis, and say that the Protestant mind is apt to be more brilliant than the Catholic, and to be less consistent.

The first distinguishing characteristic of the Catholic mind, on the other hand, is its sense of kinship with all the others in a vast body of believers. There is conceived to be a distinct relation between the worth

and truth of a doctrine, and the degree to which it is accepted by other minds. Whereas to the Protestant mind the power of final judgment on a matter of faith rests within itself; to the Catholic mind the authority of other minds, rightly accredited, counts for much. Such a mind may perhaps be less brilliant, less elastic, than the Protestant mind, but it is more regular, more calm, more measured. Its scope is wider, and it is more consistent.

Now we can see that Irenaeus, in his thinking, was a true Catholic. For surely such an appeal as his, to the unity of the church's teaching as a witness to its validity, is revealing. Regulative, with a desire for symmetry, unanimity, evenness; and a distaste amounting almost to abhorrence of any doctrine not universally attested, only a pure Catholic mind could argue from such a point of view. It is an interesting speculation to wonder, in this connection, to what an extent Irenaeus would have abandoned this argument from the unity of the church's faith throughout the world if his opponents had agreed more among themselves. If our reasoning so far has been correct, we must be prepared to admit that he would have been less able to attack the Gnostic heresies under such circumstances.

Our third consideration is more general. It is by

way of criticism, and deals with the problem of the fundamental nature of authority in religion. Going back over our study so far, we note that Irenaeus, even possessing as he did what we have termed the Catholic type of mind, was led to adduce his argument from the unity of faith by his observation of the complete lack of unity among the heretics. In other words, what led him to think in terms of unity was the fact of disunity. In view of this, is it not permissible to raise the question as to whether this concept of authority because of unity or agreement is, after all, structurally inherent in the idea of authority. While it undoubtedly is to such a Catholic thinker as Irenaeus an essential element in the principle of religious authority, it seems to me that the fact we have just noted eliminates it as a factor in a more ultimately real concept of authority.

Since we are about to note other aspects of the idea of the church as authority in matters of faith, let us summarize what we have established so far. Irenaeus' first argument for this authority is based upon the unity of the church's faith throughout the world. From this argument we were able first of all to gain a greater appreciation of our primary thesis that Irenaeus was



especially fitted to make his contribution along this line of authority, for better than almost anyone else he was in a position to grasp the fact of the unity of the faith. In the next place, we noted that from this argument we were able to deduce much about Irenaeus' type of mind, and to follow through his mental processes. As a result of this, we classed him as purely Catholic. This is of course no novel discovery, but is of value to us because it establishes empirically what we had been using as an hypothesis. In the final place, we raised a question as to the validity of this idea of the establishment of authority through unity of faith, as a component part of a valid view of the general principle of authority. Our conclusion that it was not structurally inherent in the principle of authority was by way of criticism, and certainly does not invalidate the fact that Irenaeus assumed it was so inherent.

So much for the authority of the church as attested by the unity of the faith. Irenaeus in his second argument views the authority of the church as valid because of the special position of the church as the arbiter and dispenser of a system of thought, from God to men. A good statement of his position on this point is the following: "It is not possible to name the number of the

gifts which the church throughout the whole world has received from God, in the name of Jesus Christ, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and which she exerts day by day for the benefit of the Gentiles, neither practicing deception upon any, nor taking any reward from them (on account of such miraculous interpositions). For as she has received freely from God, freely also does she minister (to others)."¹

The attitude toward the system of doctrine as a free gift of God is interesting, but we shall not pause for it here, as it merits separate consideration later. The essential element of this point of view is that it is a necessary function of the church to pass on these gifts to men. This is an emphasis that we as Protestants might do well to remark, for it is a fresh approach to this problem if we have not considered it. We are too apt to think only of the Catholic individual's responsibility to accept the church's authority in matters of belief, and as a result we fail to do justice to the church's responsibility to dispense this truth. It is a not unworthy conception.

It is interesting to note in this connection that Irenaeus views the church as an instrument of revealing

1. Against Heresies II, 32:4

Church
on par
with
other
instru-
ments

or dispensing truth as on an equal footing with other agencies divinely appointed for the same purpose. This conception was destined to be of the greatest importance to the Catholic point of view. It is excellently expressed in two or three places in Irenaeus' writing, especially in the following extract from the Apostolic Preaching.¹

"This, beloved, is the preaching of the truth, and this is the manner of our redemption, and this is the way of life, which the prophets proclaimed, and Christ established, and the apostles delivered, and the church in all the world hands on to her children."

Church
necessary
channel
of truth

Finally, Irenaeus conceives of the church, in its capacity as repository of the truth, as man's only means of obtaining that truth. In other words, Irenaeus held that man received his faith from the Church in every case rather than from God directly. It was the only means of access to God for man. It had a monopoly on spiritual advantages. Irenaeus wrote:² "For this gift of God has been entrusted to the church, as breath was to the first created man, for this purpose, that all the members receiving it may be vivified, and the (means of) communion with Christ has been distributed throughout it, that is,

1. Apostolic Preaching, 98
2. Against Heresies III, 24

the Holy Spirit, the earnest of incorruption, the means of confirming our faith, and the ladder of ascent to God."

Means of
communion
with
Christ

There are at least three separate ideas in this passage, each of them thoroughly Catholic and highly significant. The first of these is that the church is, or possesses, the means of communion with Christ. The Church has it in her power to dispense what is of far greater importance than the doctrinal truth; she has the full power to distribute the richest spiritual advantages. This conception amounts to saying that religious experience can be had by the individual only through the church's offices. Certainly no purer authority could be granted her.

Church the
means of
confirm-
ing faith

Secondly, the Church is the sole check upon faith, the measure by which to test it. Again we have an absolute conception. The faith that men receive directly from God is, Irenaeus definitely implies here, not valid or sufficient unless confirmed by the church. Again we see Irenaeus' view that the individual believer, no matter how devout, was unable to lead a religious life without recourse to the church. Again, her authority is indispensable.

Church
"ladder of
ascent to
God

Finally, the church is not only the means of communion with Christ, it is the ladder by which man ascends to God.

Once more we see the church mediating experience of God, of

spiritual things, to men. This conception of the spiritual authority of the church is at once more profound and more repellent to the truly Protestant mind than is the doctrinal supremacy which Irenaeus assigns to it.

We considered in the preceding chapter Irenaeus' conception of the nature of the church. We have analyzed in this chapter the various ways in which he viewed the church as having authority over the individual Christian in matters of faith. We are now ready to consider the question, whence, in Irenaeus' view, came this authority?

Chapter VI

SOURCES OF THE CHURCH'S AUTHORITY

We have examined Irenaeus' views on the nature of the church, and we have seen just how the church functions as the mediator of authority. In this chapter we shall discuss the claims of the church to possession of the authority we have already seen her exercising.

There are two senses in which the term authority, applied to matters of religious doctrine, may be used. The first of these refers to the control of the individual in matters of doctrine. This type of authority the believer draws from the church as a guide to his own religious life. We have been dealing with authority in this sense. But there is a second conception of authority. Here we mean the validation of the church's claim to have the truth. Whence came the power that Irenaeus ascribed to the church? We might make the difference clear by stating it thus, the church exercises religious authority in the first sense; she possesses it in the second. It is with the church's authority in this latter sense that we are now dealing.

Church of
God

The first thing to note is that, according to Irenaeus' position, the church as such occupied in its own right a place in the divine polity. It was no

The first part of the paper discusses the importance of the study of the history of the United States. It is argued that a knowledge of the past is essential for a full understanding of the present. The author then goes on to discuss the various factors that have shaped the development of the United States, including the role of the government, the influence of the economy, and the impact of the culture. The paper concludes by suggesting that a study of the history of the United States is not only a valuable academic exercise, but also a necessary one for anyone who wishes to understand the world in which we live.

The second part of the paper is a detailed analysis of the role of the government in the development of the United States. It begins by discussing the early years of the nation, when the government was a small, weak entity. It then goes on to discuss the growth of the government over the years, as it became more powerful and more involved in the lives of the people. The author argues that the government has played a crucial role in the development of the United States, and that it is essential for the future of the nation.

The third part of the paper discusses the influence of the economy on the development of the United States. It begins by discussing the early years of the nation, when the economy was based on agriculture and trade. It then goes on to discuss the growth of the economy over the years, as it became more diversified and more powerful. The author argues that the economy has played a crucial role in the development of the United States, and that it is essential for the future of the nation.

The fourth part of the paper discusses the impact of the culture on the development of the United States. It begins by discussing the early years of the nation, when the culture was based on the values of the European settlers. It then goes on to discuss the growth of the culture over the years, as it became more diverse and more powerful. The author argues that the culture has played a crucial role in the development of the United States, and that it is essential for the future of the nation.

incidental or accidental agency for the preservation and dissemination of truth but it had an integral place in God's scheme of things. Thus we find Irenaeus speaking more than once of the "church of God."¹ Such a conception in itself is a source for the peculiar position, the authority, which the church claimed.

This theological guarantee of the church's authority is not confined to the notion of the church of God. Not only is it that, but it is seen by Irenaeus as having a special relationship to Christ. We have already noted that he thought of it as the body of Christ. Additional statements and elaborations of this idea tend to make still more certain this source of the church's authority. We have the idea of the fulfillment of the new covenant foretold in the Old Testament,² "For by His advent He Himself fulfilled all things, and does still fulfill in the church the new covenant foretold by the law, onwards to the consummation." Perhaps the clearest statement of this relationship is found in Against Heresies, V, 14, 4, when Irenaeus writes that any who possess the benefits mentioned in Colossians 2:19³ will "easily overthrow all those notions of the heretics which were concocted afterwards."

1. Against Heresies, I, 13, 5

2. Ibid., IV, 34, 2

3. "Keeping in touch with that Head under whom the entire body, supplied with joints and sinews and thus compacted, grows with growth divine." Moffatt trans.

Church
reaper
of
fruit
sowed
by pro-
phets

Since the first note we made was concerned with the fact that the church according to Irenaeus was of God, and since we have just seen a reference to the covenant of the law, we should expect to find some advantage taken of the opportunity to use the prophets as a further source of the church's unique authority. Irenaeus takes full advantage of the chance. For example, we find him saying it was necessary¹ "that certain facts should be announced beforehand by the fathers in a paternal manner, and others prefigured by the prophets in a legal one, but others, described after the form of Christ, by those who have received the adoption (the Church) * * * * For the patriarchs and prophets sowed the word (about) Christ, but the church reaped, that is, received the fruit."

Apostolic
sanction

So far we have seen sources of the church's claim to possess the truth in her special relationship to God, in whose plans she has an essential part; in her special relationship to Christ, whose body she is; and in the fact that she reaps the fruit sown by the prophets, or, in other words, that the Old Testament doctrine, as well as the New, finds its final repository in the church. In a previous chapter we saw that to the mind of Irenaeus the fact of the church's consistency in doctrine was a

1. Against Heresies, IV, 25,3

guarantee of her claim to be the vessel of truth.

Important as these conceptions are, they are not the chief source of the church's authority. Irenaeus grounded his entire system upon the conception of the church as the channel through which flows the apostolic tradition. The importance of this point cannot be overemphasized.

This conception is so fundamental that a whole chapter must be devoted to it. A good summary statement by Irenaeus, for the purposes of this more general chapter, is,¹ "the apostles, like a rich man in a bank, lodged in her hands most copiously all things pertaining to the truth."

Tra-
dition
and
episco-
pacy

It is hard to separate from this appeal to apostolic sanction Irenaeus' appeal to tradition and to the succession of bishops as supporters of the church's claim. As a matter of fact, they are aspects of the same general idea, for the fact that the apostles stood as the spring from which truth flowed into the church would amount to little, for purposes of Irenaeus' argument, unless tradition and the succession of bishops had constituted a channel through which the stream could continue to flow. So, although we shall likewise discuss these elements in separate chapters, we must add them here to our list.

Irenaeus' view of the use of Scripture as an index

1. Against Heresies, III, 4, 1

Script-
ure

of religious truth does not properly belong for treatment to this chapter, as it was considered more as an independent source of revelation itself than as a source of the church's authority. It is, however, interesting to note that in Against Heresies, III, 1, 1, he speaks of "the gospel" * * which they did at one time proclaim in public, and, at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith." The term here applied to Scripture is that used by Paul in I Timothy 3:15, in reference to the church.¹ We may say, I think, that Irenaeus viewed truth as revealed in Scripture except as it was a direct record of apostolic doctrine, not so much as another direct guarantee of the church's authority, as an independent revelation thoroughly in harmony with the church's teaching.

Summary

Let us now sum up what, according to Irenaeus, constituted the support of the church's claim to authority. He saw it as the church of God. Christ was its head. It fulfilled the covenant spoken of in the law, and thus the church was the direct beneficiary of the truths possessed by the prophets. Greatest of all, the apostles had imparted to the church, from their advantageous

1. "But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth."

position, the truth they possessed. This truth was kept alive in the church as tradition, passed down by bishops. Insofar as Scripture was the written account of apostolic truth, it supported the church's position, and even when it was an independent revelation, it was in harmony with the church's traditional doctrine.

Chapter VII

THE APOSTOLIC INHERITANCE

Our task now is to take up the principal elements contributing to the church's authority, and to analyze and discuss each. We begin with the apostolic gift of truth to the church. It has already been noted that Irenaeus regarded this apostolic authority as of prime importance.

Apostles
only
preached
after
receiv-
ing power
of the
Holy
Spirit

The first problem that requires attention is an inquiry into the line of reasoning through which Irenaeus arrived at the conclusion that the apostolic preaching was worth, from the standpoint of authority, all that he claimed for it. The proponents of the Gnostic heresy had disposed of the apostolic truths by setting themselves up as "improvers of the apostles."¹ This could not be, said Irenaeus; it was unlawful. For,² "after our Lord rose from the dead, the apostles were invested with power from on high when the Holy Spirit came down upon them, were filled from all His gifts, and had perfect knowledge. Another attempt to establish the absoluteness of the apostolic teaching, but one far less successful, from the standpoint of logic, is found in Book III, 5, of the

1. Against Heresies III, 1, 1
2. Ibid.

principal work. "The apostles," writes the apologist, "being disciples of the truth, are above all falsehood; for a lie has no fellowship with the truth, just as darkness has none with light, but the presence of the one shuts out that of the other." Irenaeus evidently encountered considerable difficulty in establishing this fundamental premise. Not only did his opponents hold that they represented an improvement on the apostolic views, but they would not admit for the apostles equal knowledge of the truth with Paul.¹ Why, then, asks Irenaeus, did the Lord send the twelve apostles to the lost sheep of the house of Israel if in his eyes they did not know the truth?² He also, by quoting I Corinthians 15:11,³ uses Paul's own testimony that the apostolic truth was equivalent to his own.⁴

Thus it will be seen that Irenaeus credited all the apostles, before they even began to preach, with perfect knowledge, and that he held that the Lord approved of their grasp of the truth.

Irenaeus is careful to make clear that this truth, this perfect knowledge, possessed by the apostles, was

1. Against Heresies, III, 13, 1
2. Ibid., III, 13, 2
3. "But whether it were I or they, so we preach, and so ye believed. "
4. See also, Bk. III, preface--"For the Lord of all gave to his apostles the power of the gospel."

Truth carefully and definitely committed to the church as a com-
mitted suitable vessel. Once there, it would be preserved, as we
to the church can judge from his notion of the church. I have already
cited in a slightly different connection part of the key
passage on this point.¹ "Since therefore we have
such proofs, it is not necessary to seek the truth among
others which it is easy to obtain from the church; since
the apostles, like a rich man depositing his money in
a bank, lodged in her hands most copiously all things
pertaining to the truth, so that every man, whosoever will,
can draw from her the water of life." Such references
as Book II, 9,1, are common--"The universal church,
moreover, through the whole world, has received this
tradition from the apostles." Again,² "the church has
received from the apostles and their disciples this faith."

Irenaeus'
peculiar
stress
upon
apostolic
sanction

It is of great interest, as we read in Irenaeus,
to note time after time his references, in a tone of the
utmost finality, to something which must be true because
the apostle, or apostles, said so. Frequently he uses
a citation from an apostle to cap a series of other
arguments. Irenaeus, in brief, places the highest value
upon any apostolic sanction of the truth, and is not
happy until he has traced a doctrine to its apostolic

1. Against Heresies, III, 4, 1
2. Ibid., I, 10, 1

origin. This is true, it is important to note, because of the thesis we announced in our introduction, that Irenaeus, because of his position in time, and his personal relationship to the apostolic teaching, was, better than any churchman of his time, fitted to set up such a system as he did.

The unavoidable conclusion to which this view of the apostolic inheritance must lead, is that the truth is to be found nowhere else but in the catholic church, the sole depository of apostolic doctrine. This is the heart of Irenaeus' message insofar as it is a refutation of the heresies. Since they were of recent origin, and therefore could not be traced back to the apostles, their claims for attention and credence were absolutely unfounded. Here we have the rationale for Irenaeus' view of the church, that we have already studied. The fourth chapter of Book III of Against Heresies is devoted to an exposition of this position. Even the nations which, because of the language differences, are barbarians, are nevertheless, because they hold to the apostolic tradition, even though it be not in written form, "very wise indeed," and, "they would at once stop their ears and flee as far off as possible, "if any were to preach to them the

C

inventions of the heretic teachers, "among whom neither church nor doctrine has ever been established."¹

Summary

We are now ready to sum up what we have discovered about Irenaeus view of the apostolic teaching as it contributed to the authority of the church. In the first place, he established for the apostolic preaching absolute validity, since it was inspired and guided to perfection by the Holy Spirit, and since the Lord himself approved of the extent of the apostles' knowledge. Next, Irenaeus was careful to state that it was this perfect apostolic knowledge which was committed to the church, the vessel in which it was to be preserved. Irenaeus placed the highest value upon the apostolic origin of any bit of doctrine. As a result, he held that only that church which was the vessel in which it was preserved could claim the truth. The truth could be found nowhere else.

Chapter VIII

TRADITION AS AUTHORITY

Irenaeus relies largely upon tradition, carrying out the figure that has already been suggested, if the apostles were the source or spring of the truth, and the church was the channel through which the stream flowed, tradition, to Irenaeus, was the stream itself. He saw the truth as dependent upon an external, historical connection with the mother churches, a connection largely made possible by tradition.

It is not difficult to build up a clear picture of what Irenaeus meant by tradition. When he urges in the preface to Book III that believers resist the heretics in "defence of the only true and life-giving faith, which the church has received from the apostles and imparted to her sons," he is speaking of the defence of tradition. This tradition was universal throughout the church. He wrote that it "was within the power of all, therefore, in every church, who may wish to see the truth, to contemplate clearly the tradition of the apostles manifested throughout the whole world."¹ He expressed even more clearly this important point in Book I, 10, when he was seeking to establish the unity of the churches faith throughout the world.

1. Against Heresies, III, 3, 1

"For, although the languages of the world are dissimilar, yet the import of the tradition is one and the same. For the churches which have been planted in Germany do not believe or hand down anything different, nor do those in Spain, nor those in Gaul, nor those in Egypt, nor those in Libya, nor those which have been established in the central regions of the world."

The significance of this single import of tradition cannot be overstated. For, authority can only be assigned to such a unified, consistent body of teaching. To just that degree that Protestant thought has rejected as valuable the concept of homogeneous tradition, has it rejected the notion of authority for the church.

The
rule
of
faith

Not only did Irenaeus build upon the fact that the tradition was the same in all the churches, but he went on one step further in his analysis and showed that each individual, by the device of the baptismal formula, was sure of receiving it. For the Irenaeian concept of the rule of truth was equivalent to that of the tradition. The function of the rule of truth was to serve as a guarantee that each believer had available for him the essentials of the tradition.¹ It is wise for us, I think, in

1. "In like manner he also who retains unchangeable in his heart the rule of the truth which he received by means of baptism, will doubtless recognize the names, the expressions, and the
(note continued on next page)

determining what part the rule of truth played in Irenaeus' system as a factor in the principle of authority, to consider it entirely in this relationship to the tradition. Any other estimate of it seems exaggerated.

Import-
ance of
Rome

It is under this subject of tradition that Irenaeus' views on the primacy of the church at Rome can best be treated. For the primacy that he was willing to assign to it was chiefly, if not entirely due, to its unique traditional heritage, and its relationship to the two apostles Irenaeus viewed as most significant.

1. "We put to confusion all those who * * assemble in unauthorized meetings, by indicating that tradition derived from the apostles, of the very great, the very ancient, and universally known church founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul."

This advantage granted to Rome was, however, one of degree only. We must be very careful lest we credit Irenaeus with more respect for the special claims of Rome than he really felt, and also, lest we ground such special power as he did attribute to Rome, upon the wrong considerations. The churches in Asia possessed the tradition from sources equally apostolic as were those of the Roman share of

parables taken from the Scriptures, but will by no means acknowledge the blasphemous use which these men make of them." Against Heresies, I, 9, 4. Note also--"Now, that we may not suffer aught of this kind, we must needs hold the rule of faith without deviation." Ap. Preaching, 3

1. Against Heresies, III, 3, 2

tradition.¹

Tradition not
amenable to
change

We have said that to Irenaeus the tradition upon which he founded so much was the body of doctrine, committed by the apostles to the church, and thus made available to each believer. This tradition was the same throughout the whole geographical extent of the church. It was necessary for him to be certain that the tradition as known by one generation would be the same as that comprehended by a later. The danger of any change was obviated by the unalterable nature of tradition itself. His statement of this is worthy of note. It has already been cited in another connection, but is of special significance on this point.²

"Nor will any one of the rulers in the churches, however highly gifted he may be in point of eloquence, teach doctrines different from these (for no one is greater than the Master); nor, on the other hand, will he who is deficient in power of expression inflict injury on the tradition. For the faith being ever one and the same, neither does one who is able at great length to discourse regarding it, make any addition to it, nor does one, who can say but little diminish it."

Thus did Irenaeus conceive of tradition, brilliancy in its exponents could add nothing to its import; nor could the intellectual weakness of some of its teachers detract

1. "Polycarp was, by apostles in Asia, appointed bishop of the church in Smyrna." Against Heresies, III, 3, 4. Also--"To these things all the Asiatic churches testify." Ibid.
2. Against Heresies, I, 10, 2

from the great spiritual values it contained.

There are two criticisms which it seems necessary to make upon this particular idea of Irenaeus'. Since he regarded tradition as so unchangeable, he was led by his acceptance of it into some serious errors. Perhaps the most outstanding is his statement that Jesus taught when he was over forty years of age. He had acquired this view from what he thought was tradition, and therefore he persisted in it, although he probably had misunderstood his source. Again, it must be remembered that tradition, in the age in which Irenaeus lived, was then a more common factor in the experience of the individual believer than it is now.¹ Men then were closer to the apostolic age. Therefore, much that Irenaeus taught on that point, while valid then, would not necessarily be so in this era when tradition has come so much further from its source.

Script-
ure con-
firmed
by
tradi-
tion

The final problem on this topic is to ascertain what relation Irenaeus held tradition to bear the Scripture. In at least one place in his writing, (Against Heresies, III, 4, 1) he indicates that tradition would be sufficient even if we had not the Scriptures.

"For how should it be if the apostles themselves had not left us writings? Would it not be

1. Beaven, Account of Irenaeus, p. 151

necessary to follow the course of the tradition which they handed down to those to whom they did commit the churches?"

Again, Irenaeus cites the "barbarians" as holding the faith in a satisfactory measure, but they have¹ "salvation written in their hearts by the Spirit, without paper or ink, and carefully preserving the ancient tradition."

At other times he seems to place Scripture and tradition upon an equal basis. For example, he considers it equally wrong on the part of the heretics to follow neither Scripture nor tradition,² and, as we shall see in the chapter especially devoted to Irenaeus' view of Scripture, its chief characteristic was that it was the written record of apostolic tradition. Thus we may say, in general, of Irenaeus' view that tradition served as a confirming agent to Scripture, and that Scripture was especially valuable as religious authority insofar as it incorporated in written form the truths of tradition.

Summary

Summing up the findings of this chapter, we note first that by tradition Irenaeus meant the faith, or body of truth, committed to the church by the apostles. This tradition remained one and the same in import throughout the church, and being greater than any agent of the church,

1. Against Heresies, III, 4, 2
2. Ibid., III, 2

could neither be improved by brilliant teaching nor harmed by weak. The rule of faith was to Irenaeus a source of authority insofar as it gave the individual access to the main stream of tradition. Finally, tradition affords a check or confirmation of Scripture. Thus Irenaeus saw in tradition a source of faith, a means to religious authority.

Chapter IX
THE EPISCOPACY IN RELATION TO
RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY

If we care to continue our use of the metaphor which has been suggested, we might say that to Irenaeus, if the church is the channel through which the stream of tradition flows from the apostolic fountain-head of truth, the bishops of the church are side canals through which the tradition, in the form of the church's teaching, is diverted to the believers.

Such a statement, however, presents only half the truth. Not only did the episcopacy have, according to Irenaeus, this teaching function, but it was the vehicle of catholic tradition, the continuation of the apostolate. We noted in the chapter on Irenaeus' conception of the church that it had two functions; it was at once the preserver and the dispenser of the truth. The episcopacy was the specific agency through which these functions were discharged. It can be understood adequately only in terms of both these functions, and an examination of both of them will give a satisfactory picture of the episcopacy.

Episco-
pacy as
preserv-
er of
apostolic
tradition

This chapter is eminently significant in nature.

Here we have the most practical aspect of Irenaeus' theory

of authority. Here we see his principles set forth in terms of an everyday, human, tangible institution.

"If you wish to ascertain the doctrine of the apostles, apply to the church of the apostles," is Lightfoot's formula for Irenaeus' point of view on this point.¹ It is as succinct a statement as any. In other words, the apostolic tradition is readily ascertainable, and is right at hand in the church. We saw in the chapter on tradition that the truth had remained unchanged in the church. It was the bishops who had preserved it. They were the agents whose brilliance could not add to it, nor yet their inefficiency detract from it.

The statement of Irenaeus on this point is found in Against Heresies III, 3, 1. It is a long citation, but is very important.

"It is within the power of all to contemplate clearly the tradition of the apostles manifested throughout the whole world; and we are in a position to reckon up those who were by the apostles instituted bishops in the churches, and the successions of these men to our own times; those who neither taught nor knew of anything like what these heretics rave about. For if the apostles had known hidden mysteries, which they were in the habit of imparting to "the perfect" apart and privily from the rest, they would have delivered them especially to those to whom they were also committing the churches them-

1. In Schaff, History Christian Church, p. 149

selves. For they were desirous that these men should be very perfect and blameless in all things, whom also they were leaving behind as their successors, delivering up their own place of government to these men; which men, if they discharged their functions honestly, would be a great boon, but if they should fall away, the direct calamity."

Apart from the rather telling argument against the Gnostic claim to mysterious knowledge, we have here three important ideas for our specific discussion. The first of these is that the bishops occupy the precise governing positions, and are to exercise the functions of the apostles, with the understanding of the latter. Not only are the bishops in every way the equivalents of the apostles in the church organization, but they occupy that place by the plans of the apostles themselves. They are, as a group, the apostolically appointed successors of the apostles.

In the second place, the bishops were, as they were selected by the apostles, and therefore presumably still were in the scheme of Irenaeus, the most perfect and blameless men who could be found. This serves to increase at once the peculiar advantages claimed for the office. Irenaeus conceived of it with so much respect that only the best men were fit for it. Thus not only the office, but, in the nature of things, the character

Unbroken
succes-
sion

of the incumbents, made for the sanctity of the episcopacy.

The third idea is that it was possible for men to reckon up the bishops through the years to their own time, and thus to be sure that the line had been unbroken. In this sense, the bishops were the type of the church as the channel of tradition, that is, they were the means through which the way was kept open for the continuous flow of truth from generation to generation.

It is almost impossible to state too emphatically the importance of this idea. The theory of apostolic succession in Catholic churches is so much a part of current theological and ecclesiastical thought, both Catholic and Protestant, that we are indeed fortunate to have in Irenaeus an early and definite formulation of it. The work that he did was essentially the groundwork for the Catholic point of view as we know it. For, next to the question as to the particular merits of direct apostolic succession, which it is not our province to discuss, ranks that of bridging the gap between the earliest historically verifiable bishops and the actual fountain-head of truth. This question did not bother Irenaeus at all.

He was sure that Peter had with Paul, founded the

church at Rome.¹ We have already seen why he granted special authoritative powers to this church. From Peter the office of the episcopate went directly into the hands of Linus. He was followed by Anacletus. Then came Clement, with "the preaching of the apostles still echoing in his ears, and their traditions before his eyes."² Then in order came Evaristus, Alexander, Sixtus, Telesphorus, who was "gloriously martyred, Hyginus, Pius, Anicetus, Soter, and then Eleutherius whom Irenaeus himself had been to see. Thus, for the apologist at least, the line was unbroken and "in this order, and by this succession, the ecclesiastical tradition from the apostles, and the preaching of the truth, have come down to us. And in this is most abundant proof that there is one and the same vivifying faith, which has been preserved in the church from the apostles until now, and handed down in truth."³

The
office
rather
than
the
man

It is important and helpful to make a distinction here. Irenaeus was far more interested in, and dependent upon, the episcopate as an institution, than individual bishops. This line was unbroken in Rome, true enough, but that was not absolutely final. Irenaeus, a bishop himself, knew too much about men to pin the whole structure of the faith upon one individual who held the office of bishop

1. Against Heresies, III, 3, 2
2. Ibid., III, 3, 3
3. Ibid.

at a particular time. If one line broke because of a weak link, it was inconceivable that the truth would not be adequately preserved throughout the church-wide episcopate.

That Irenaeus recognized the danger we may infer from the statement about tradition that ability could not improve it, nor inability harm it. He states this possibility even more clearly in Against Heresies IV, 26, 2, when he writes that, as it is incumbent to obey the presbyters who possess the succession of the apostles, it is likewise incumbent to hold in suspicion those who depart from the primitive succession.

Presby-
ters

Irenaeus uses the terms bishop and presbyter, at times with a perplexing ambiguity. This really does not detract from his view of the episcopal preservation of the truth, for, if presbyters were bishops in his terminology, they certainly possessed the truth, and if all presbyters were not bishops, they were at least presbyterii ordine, and so shared the benefits of the apostolic succession.

Bishops
as
teach-
ers

It was not enough for the bishops to preserve by means of unbroken succession, the truth committed to the church by the apostles. They also, as a second function, as the subcanals of the main channel, taught it to the

people. This is what Irenaeus referred to when he said, in the passage last cited, that "it is incumbent to obey the presbyters." The bishops were to give out the truth that they had; they were to hold it so that all who wished to know the whole truth might contemplate it.

Summary We have in this chapter noted the two functions of the episcopate. It both preserved and taught the truth. The bishops received their warrant of office direct from the apostles, in fact, typical men were selected for the office by the apostles themselves. The truth was preserved by means of an unbroken succession, easily verifiable, of individuals. For our purpose, from the standpoint the principle of authority, a good formula is the one suggested by Schaff, the validating function of the episcopacy as a pedagogical principle in time of heresy.

Chapter X

THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

Here we are dealing with a problem somewhat different from those that have preceded. The various other agencies of religious authority that we have examined have been effective in their relationship to the church, which, according to Irenaeus and the Catholic point of view, is the central source of authority. Thus apostolic sanction in general, and tradition and the episcopate in particular, were discussed as units, but at the same time their relation to the church was not forgotten. We now round out our discussion by referring to an independent source of authority, the Scriptures.

We cannot take account here of what Irenaeus considered as canonical in Scripture. But he is very useful in his statements, direct and indirect, on the authenticity of the gospels. He establishes this in the course of a discussion that is even more interesting from the standpoint of our inquiry into the principle of authority.

True
value
of
Script-
ure

The true value of Scripture as authority lies in the fact, said Irenaeus, that it was the written record of the apostolic truth. Thus it was equivalent to tradition, being merely tradition in another form. This point of view

is expressed in Against Heresies, III, 1, 1.

"Matthew also issued a written gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the church. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the gospel preached by him. Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia."

This is equivalent to a statement that the apostles incorporated in their gospels the same tradition that they handed down in their oral teaching. That Irenaeus considered Scripture as, in general, equivalent to tradition is seen from his denunciation of the heretics as following neither Scripture nor tradition.¹

Old
Testa-
ment

Something of what Irenaeus thought of the Old Testament may be adduced from his references to the prophets, and to the fulfillment of the law, discussed earlier. In general we may say that, as proofs of revelation, he was willing to accept both Testaments upon an equal basis. We dare not place too much emphasis upon specific cases, however, for Irenaeus evidently had versions of the Old Testament different from our own. For example,² he cites a verse from

1. Against Heresies, III, 2 (heading)

2. Ibid., III, 20, 4

Isaiah or Jeremiah which we find in neither.

If that portion of Scripture which is the written record of apostolic truth is equivalent to tradition, there is nevertheless one respect in which Scripture is to count more heavily than tradition. That is, insofar as Scripture is the record of revelation. It is upon Scripture from this point of view that much of the argument in refutation of heresy is based. If the Gnostics wanted to claim revelation as their ally; Irenaeus had a better account of revelation. Notice how confident he is, in the preface to Book III. "In this third book," he writes, "I shall adduce proofs from the Scriptures, so that I may come behind in nothing of what thou¹ hast enjoined." He based this position upon his claim that the Scriptures, instead of being ambiguous, as the Gnostics claimed, were certain and clear.² If portions of Scripture are, said Irenaeus, obscure and ambiguous, they can always be explained in the light of other passages that are not obscure.³

Thus Scripture is in one sense the written form of the apostolic tradition, and in another the record

1. The friend who had requested help in refuting the Gnostic heresies.
2. Against Heresies, III, 2, 1
3. Ibid., II, 10, 1

of revelation. In both of these capacities it serves as an instrument of authority. It is true, however, that in the former sense it is more helpful to the church; and in the second, to the individual believer.

GENERAL SUMMARY

It remains for us to gather up our observations of Irenaeus' views on authority in religion, and to combine them in an orderly statement in summary form.

Irenaeus was born probably between the years 115 and 125 of the Christian era. It is difficult to determine the date even approximately; and impossible to set it definitely. However, from internal evidence we are able to set the date of his birth as most likely within the period we named. He was born in or near Smyrna. He went as a missionary to Gaul, and in 177 became bishop of Lyons. The date and circumstances of his death are unknown. He was a man of literary proficiency, but we have besides fragments of others, only one complete work, Against Heresies, a vigorous formulation of Christian faith and refutation of the current Gnostic heresies.

Irenaeus was directly connected with the first generation of Christian teachers. His teacher was Polycarp. Polycarp was in turn instructed by John. This John has long been thought to have been the apostle, but recent scholarship has made it seem possible that it was another prominent early Christian, John the Elder. In either case, Irenaeus, through Polycarp, was directly connected with the apostolic age.

In character, we observed that Irenaeus was first of all a religious man. He was cultured, and had a broad education for the time. His was essentially a mind turned toward moderation, harmony, calmness, regularity.

Both his position in time, which gave him access to important first-hand knowledge, and his mental characteristics fitted him for the particular work that was to be his.

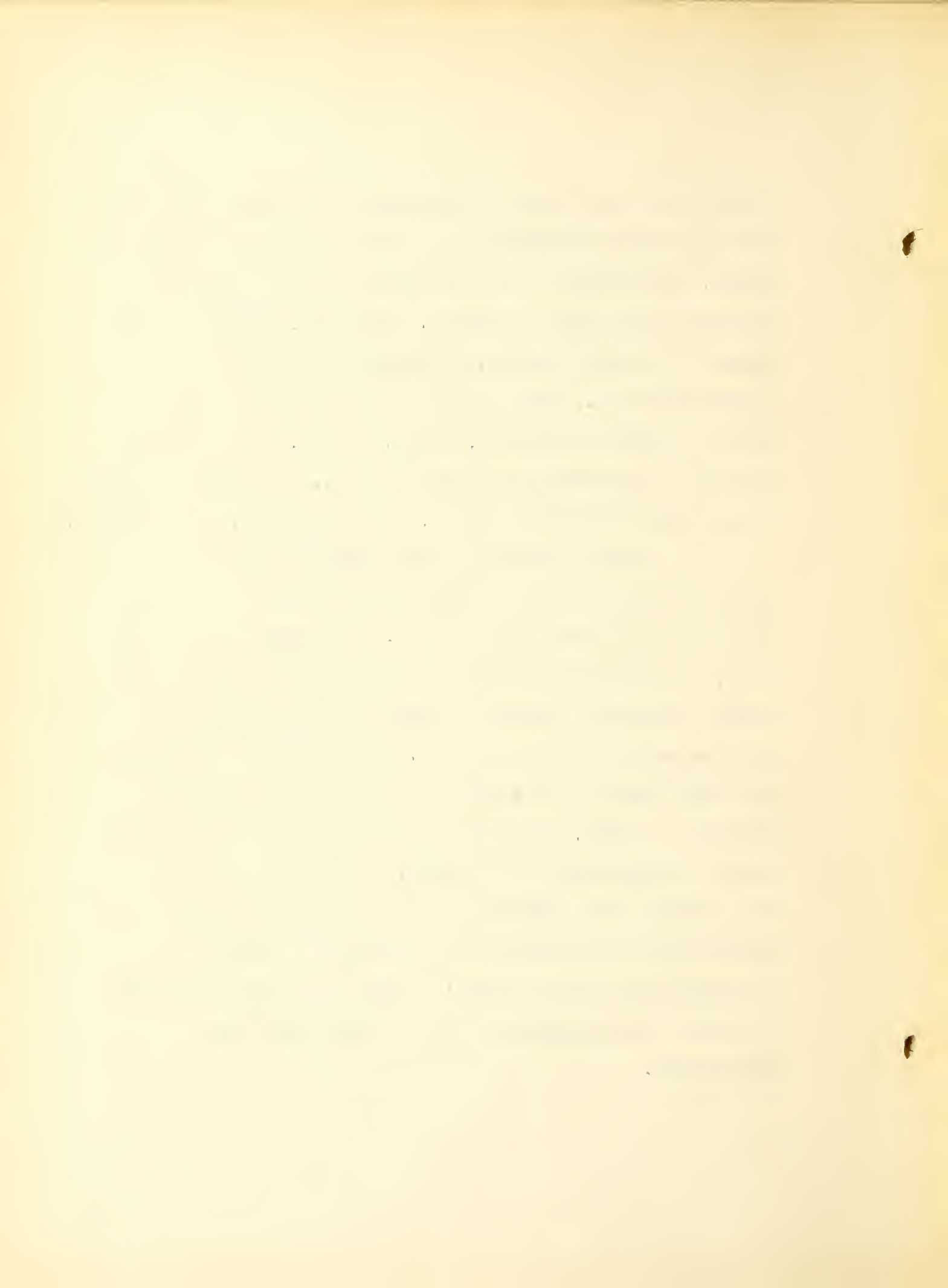
Irenaeus conceived of the church in various senses. He applied the term upon occasion to local, factual groups of believers. More generally, however, he thought of the term as applying to the visible church universal, the ascertainable body of believers everywhere. To this church Irenaeus assigned two important functions. In the first place, the church is charged with the preservation, intact and unchanged, of the faith. In the second place, it is charged with passing on this truth to men.

Irenaeus also thought of the church in a more abstract sense than that of this ascertainable body. He saw it as the body of Christ; as an organism whose head was the Logos. It was the union of the adopted sons of God.

Thinking of the church in its most general meaning

of the world-wide body of believers everywhere, we note that Irenaeus ascribed to it great authority in matters of faith. He granted it this authority first because its faith was the same throughout. Irenaeus, because of the shape his career assumed, was especially fitted to appreciate this. His argument from this unity gives us a clear picture of his mind, which, we saw, was typically Catholic. Sketching the Catholic mind, we noted its stress upon kinship with other minds, its regularity, its calmness.

As a second reason for the church's authority, Irenaeus saw the church as holding in trust the system of doctrine as a free gift from God. The church was, in his eyes, as important an agency for revealing truth as any other. Finally, Irenaeus conceived of the church as an indispensable channel of truth. She had in her keeping the only means by which men could enter into communion with God. Faith, even received by men directly from God, must be confirmed by the church. The church even was, to Irenaeus, the ladder by which men ascend to God. Thus he was not content to ascribe to the church intellectual control of men's faith; she was at the same time the sole dispenser of the highest spiritual advantages.



Having stated in synopsis the view Irenaeus took of the church's authority, we now note whence this authority came. The church, he held, had a place of her own in the divine polity. She was the church of God, the fulfillment of the new covenant, the reaper of the fruit sown by the prophets. She was above all the channel through which flowed the original apostolic tradition. This tradition was identical with the truth the church possessed; the bishops, who maintained it, were her agents. Scripture, as it was the record of this tradition, of course supported the church, and as it was not was in harmony with the church.

Inquiring into the nature of the apostolic inheritance, we saw that Irenaeus guaranteed the power of the apostles' teaching by holding that they did not teach until after they had been inspired by the Holy Spirit. He was careful to state clearly that they actually committed their truth to the church for preservation. The conclusion of his views was that sole authority must rest in the church as the possessor of this truth.

Tradition, in brief, was the stream of truth which, springing from the apostolic source, flowed undiluted through the church. The rule of faith was designed to guarantee that each individual received this tradition.

Rome was supreme in doctrinal points because her tradition was oldest and purest. The church's tradition was above the power of a brilliant bishop to improve, or a dull one to harm. Scripture was in conformity with it.

Irenaeus was more interested in the episcopacy than in the individual bishops. Individuals might betray their trust; the institution could not. It was the specific organ of the church which actually discharged her two general functions. The episcopacy preserved the apostolic doctrine. As an institution, it had been started by the apostles for this purpose, and by naming the first bishops the apostles had indicated the type of men for the office. The guarantee of authority lay in the unbroken, verifiable succession. The bishops were not only the preservers of truth; it was their duty as well to teach it. In this function they were direct agents of the church, which had been charged with this function. They in this respect were the side canals from the main channel through which flowed the stream of truth.

Irenaeus thought of scripture, insofar as it was the record of apostolic truth, as identical with tradition. Thus it had, to this extent, the same authority as tradition

in regulating belief. Insofar as Scripture was the record of direct revelation, it had an independent authority in the eyes of Irenaeus. Yet this authority would never clash with that of the church.

Thus we come to the end of our survey. Irenaeus, link between the apostolic age and the great period in which the church took shape and assumed her rights, was a striking figure. Defending fearlessly the truth in the struggle with heresy, beneficiary by direct inheritance of the knowledge of those who had walked and talked with the Lord, man of piety and zeal, with the moderation, the reason, the love of harmony, that the age needed, who shall say that Providence did not raise him up in his time?

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

Legend

No note after a work indicates it was used in
its entirety
Sec., entire section on Irenaeus
Chap.(s), entire chapter or chapters on Irenaeus
Ref., numerous references scattered throughout
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